

Ritual Defamation: A Contemporary Academic Example

[Daniel McGowan](#)

The term *ritual defamation* was coined by Laird Wilcox to describe the destruction of the reputation of a person by unfair, wrongful, or malicious speech or publication. The defamation is in retaliation for opinions expressed by the victim, with the intention of silencing that person's influence, and making an example of him so as to discourage similar "insensitivity" to subjects currently ruled as taboo. It is aggressive, organized and skillfully applied, often by a representative of a special interest group, such as, ironically, the Anti-Defamation League.

Ritual defamation is not called "ritual" because it follows any prescribed religious or mystical doctrine, nor is it embraced in any particular document or scripture. Rather, it is ritualistic because it follows a predictable, stereotyped pattern which embraces a number of elements, as in a ritual.

Laird Wilcox enumerated eight basic elements of a *ritual defamation*:

First, the victim must have violated a particular taboo, usually by expressing or identifying with a forbidden attitude, opinion or belief.

Second, the defamers condemn the character of the victim, never offering more than a perfunctory challenge to the particular attitudes, opinions or beliefs the victim expressed or implied. Character assassination is its primary tool.

Third, the defamers avoid engaging in any kind of debate over the truthfulness or reasonableness of what has been expressed. Their goal is not discussion but rather condemnation, censorship and repression.

Fourth, the victim is usually someone who is vulnerable to public opinion, although perhaps in a very modest way. It could be a schoolteacher, writer, businessman, minor official, or merely an outspoken citizen; visibility enhances vulnerability to ritual defamation.

Fifth, an attempt is made to involve others in the defamation. In the case of a public official, other public officials will be urged to denounce the offender. In the case of a student, other students will be called upon; in the case of a professor, other professors will be asked to join the condemnation.

Sixth, in order for a ritual defamation to be most effective, the victim must be dehumanized to the extent that he becomes identical with the offending attitude, opinion or belief, and in a manner which distorts his views to the point where they appear at their most extreme. For example, a victim who is defamed as a "subversive" will be identified with the worst images of subversion, such as espionage, terrorism or treason.

Seventh, the defamation tries to bring pressure and humiliation on the victim from every quarter, including family and friends. If the victim has school children, they may be taunted and ridiculed as a consequence of adverse publicity. If the victim is employed, he may be fired from his job. If the victim belongs to clubs or associations, other members may be urged to expel him.

Eighth, any explanation the victim may offer is dismissed as irrelevant. To claim truth as a defense for a tabooed opinion or belief is treated as defiance and only compounds the offense. Ritual defamation is

often not necessarily an issue of being wrong or incorrect but rather of "insensitivity" and failing to observe social taboos.[\[1\]](#)

Ritual defamation is not used to persuade, but rather to punish. It is used to hurt, to intimidate, to destroy, and to persecute, and to avoid the dialogue, debate and discussion that free speech implies. Its obvious maliciousness is often hidden behind the dictates of political correctness and required sensitivity to established myths.

Ritual Defamation at Hobart and William Smith Colleges: A Textbook Example

In the September 2009 I wrote an op-ed for the local newspaper, *The Finger Lakes Times*, defining "Holocaust Denial." I submitted it in response to the media frenzy and demonization of Iranian President Ahmadinejad, who was scheduled to address the UN General Assembly. After several delays, it was published on September 27th under a quarter-page picture of Ahmadinejad and under the headline "What do deniers really mean? (See Appendix 1)

Although the definition I presented has been widely accepted, both by those who affirm and by those who contest or "revise" the current narrative of the Holocaust, and although the facts I presented were not challenged, the op-ed sparked a classic case of *ritual defamation*. Questioning the Holocaust narrative, or even defining what it means to question it, is arguably the most serious taboo in the United States today. It is considered "beyond the pale" and even touching the subject is like touching the third rail on the subway – instant death to your career.

First Blood

On October 3rd a "colleague" from the Education Department, James MaKinster, "facilitated" a smear letter, signed by six additional colleagues, and circulated it by email to over 300 other professors and people in the Hobart and William Smith Colleges community. Their letter was addressed to the colleges' President Mark Gearan; it denounced me with lies and insidious innuendos and demanded the revocation of my status as a faculty emeritus.

I heard about the MaKinster letter quite by happenstance soon after it was circulated, but neither the President nor any of the original seven who signed it was willing to provide me with a copy. It was not until May 2011 some 20 months later that I finally got a copy of the email version, not of the final letter with all the signatures. (See Appendix 2)

My Response

In a vain attempt to clear my name and set the record straight I sent a message to the entire community rebutting the charges made in the MaKinster smear letter. I stated that:

1. Contrary to the feigned outrage of my ritual defamers as to the date of publishing the op-ed, I had nothing to do with the timing of the article and make no apology for when it appeared vis-à-vis a Jewish holiday.
2. My ritual defamers' egregious claim to know my "personal beliefs" and their claim that I used my title to win them credence was untrue. Nowhere were my personal beliefs stated. Moreover my article included an exceptionally long disclaimer showing that The Colleges neither condone nor condemn what I had written.

3. My ritual defamers' claim that "Holocaust denial carries absolutely no weight among academic scholars in any field whatsoever" was also untrue. There are a number of scholars who dare to criticize the typical Holocaust narrative and are willing to fight the slime hurled at them by ardent Zionists who feel it their duty to protect the current version that serves as the sword and shield of apartheid Israel. (As a footnote, our former provost and former dean of women (both Jewish) demanded that I not use the word "apartheid" in connection with Israel. Although the term was used in the Israeli press and later by ex-President Jimmy Carter, they did not consider it to be "suitable discourse" on our campus where, ironically, we routinely claim to support free speech and diversity of opinion.)

4. My ritual defamers said that "denying undisputed facts of the holocaust (sic) is not a way to show support for the Palestinians." First, the three tenets of Holocaust revisionism are clearly not "undisputed." To the contrary, these taboos are hotly and passionately disputed; people's lives are ruined when they dispute these "facts" or even mention them. In fourteen countries you can get jail time for disputing "facts" surrounding the Holocaust.

Second, disputing purported facts is what science and historical analysis are all about. We academics have no problem discussing and disputing whether or not Jesus Christ is truly the son of God, or if President Obama's birth certificate is real, or if Jewish slaves built the Egyptian pyramids, or if Roosevelt knew a Japanese attack on Hawaii was imminent, but we are not allowed to discuss or dispute the six-million figure, which was bantered about before World War I. (Yes, before World War I; see for example, "Dr. Paul Nathan's View of Russian Massacre", *The New York Times*, March 25, 1906.) To question the six million figure on most American campuses is simply taboo.

Finally, what gives these ritual defamers the credentials to pontificate on what supports or hurts Palestinians? None of them are experts on Palestine and none are activists for Palestinian human rights. To the contrary, some of them have been responsible for feting at Hobart and William Smith Colleges anti-Palestinian demagogues including Elie Wiesel and even Benyamin Netanyahu. They have also endorsed giving Madeleine Albright our highest *humanitarian* award, which was not only ironic, but disgraceful in light of her statement that the deaths of over 500,000 Iraqi children were "worth it".

5. Labeling Holocaust revisionism "Holocaust denial" is unwarrantedly pejorative. It might be fine for Fox News, but it is not conducive to, and often precludes, intelligent discourse. To call Holocaust revisionism "thinly veiled anti-Semitism" is simply untrue and it defames scholars and others, including Jews, who question the Holocaust doctrine as we are fed it in hundreds of films, books, articles, and commentaries. Terms like Holocaust Industry, Holocaust Fatigue, Holocaust professional, Holocaust wannabes, and Holocaust High Priest were not coined by "deniers" or anti-Semites; they were coined by Jews. (The High Priest quip is an obvious reference to Elie Wiesel; it was made by Tova Reich in her book *My Holocaust*. Tova's husband, Walter Reich, was the former director of the US Holocaust Museum in Washington.)

In 1946 the US government told us that 20 million people were murdered by Hitler. Now that figure is said to be 11 million; it has been "revised" downward and literally carved in stone at the US Holocaust Memorial. For years we were told that over 4 million were killed at Auschwitz alone, but by the early 1990s that figure was "revised" downward to 1.5 million. Wiesel tells us that people were thrown alive onto pyres; he claims to have seen it with his own eyes; today even Israeli-trained guides at Auschwitz say that is not true. They have already "revised" his narrative. These are but a few examples of historical revisionism, examples that are not inherently anti-Semitic and no longer considered taboo.

6. It is most interesting to see academic colleagues say, “(a)s we all know ... the term ‘ethnic cleansing’ was introduced to make genocide sound more palatable.” That means they either deny that Palestinians have been (and continue to be) ethnically cleansed or they agree that Israel is performing genocide on the Palestinian people.

7. While the ritual defamers found my piece to be “abhorrent,” they seemed unable to find fault with a single fact I presented. So they resorted to name-calling and labeled the piece “hate speech” and “unsupported vitriol” and smeared my name to hundreds of people. I am surprised that the Anti-Defamation League or the Mossad did not come knocking on my door.

8. The ritual defamers genuinely were concerned about the op-ed’s impact on our Jewish students, staff, and faculty. But maybe it is time for all members of the community to see the Holocaust for what it really was and not the unquestionable, unimpeachable, doctrine that makes Jewish suffering superior to that of other people. Maybe it is time to recognize that Zionism as a political movement to create a Jewish state in Palestine began long before the Holocaust and that Zionist discrimination, dehumanization, and dispossession of the Palestinian people should not be excused by it. Maybe it is time to see that since over half the population (within the borders controlled by Israel) is not Jewish, the dream of creating a Jewish state has failed. Walling in the non-Jews or putting them in Bantustans or driving them into Jordan will not make Israel a Jewish state. Nationalistic allegiance to “blood and soil” has been a failure in Germany and in Israel. That should be the real lesson of the Holocaust.

9. To say that my op-ed “does not meet our expectation of minimally rational and minimally humane discourse” is pure nonsense. The piece is well written, well substantiated, and quite humane.

10. The ritual defamers are quite right about one thing; they were deeply disturbed and saddened to see a Hobart and William Smith Colleges title attached to it, even with a lengthy disclaimer. Diversity and perspectives outside the mainstream are to be encouraged, but not if they question Jewish power, Israel, or Holocaust doctrine. Apparently those topics are totally taboo.

11. The demand to President Gearan to remove my title of Professor Emeritus is both classic and stupid. Would it save Hobart and William Smith Colleges from being associated with my writings? Of course not; I would simply become “Former Professor Emeritus at Hobart and William Smith Colleges” with no disclaimer.

But what it would really do is to cast me into the briar patch with Norman Finkelstein, Marc Ellis, Paul Eisen, Henry Herskovitz, Gilad Atzmon, Rich Siegel, and Hedy Epstein (a Holocaust survivor), all friends of mine and all anti-Zionists.

Lest I seem irreverent or unscathed by this widely-circulated smear letter from my ritual defamers, allow me to admit that I have been hurt by it. Many faculty and other HWS folks now shun me as a *persona non grata* largely because they only read the slime and never my rebuttal. My former student and long-time friend, David Deming, who is now the Chair of the HWS Board does not answer my letters. President Gearan does not answer them either. Board member Roy Dexheimer, disparages me and wonders if I “fell off my meds.” Another Board member, Stuart Pilch, took it a step further and made a threatening phone call to my home and a promise “to hunt me down.”

Recourse? Most Doors Are Closed

For twenty months I did not know the contents of the MaKinster email. When I discovered it as an email draft, my first inclination was to sue him and the other six faculty members who circulated it. I wanted to sue for libel and defamation of character. I knew it would be expensive, but I was determined to correct the lies they had spread about me. The problem was that in New York State the statute of limitations for libel is one year from the date it was committed, not one year from the date it was discovered.

I went to the Provost, who is the head of our faculty, and asked her to get me a copy of the final letter as it was sent to President Gearan. (I had seen only the email draft of it shown in Appendix 2) I wanted a copy of the final letter including the names of all those ritual defamers who had signed it -- MaKinster and the six other "facilitators" and any others of the 300 they sent it to who might have also signed). She refused on the grounds of "confidentiality".

I went to the President and asked for a copy; he refused. I asked MaKinster; he refused to give me a copy of the letter and refused to meet with me to discuss it. I asked the other six "facilitators". Three agreed to meet with me, but were unable to give me a copy of the final letter. They all told me that they thought additional people had signed, but they could not or would not name a single one for sure. Like MaKinster, the remaining three "colleagues" refused to meet with me or give me a copy of what they had collectively written in their smear letter.

I went to The Grievance Committee, but I was told that I could not bring the issue before it, since that committee does not hear such matters. I asked to address the faculty at large, but I was told that only faculty can attend an HWS Faculty Meeting and not those who are retired, with or without emeritus status.

I tried a market approach and publicly offered a \$1,000 contribution to Hobart and William Smith Colleges in return for a final copy of the MaKinster ritual defamation letter with the names of all signatories. I made the offer by email to all current faculty members. No response. I raised the offer to \$1,500. Some faculty called on me to stop; some even charged me with smearing MaKinster. Others counseled me to "turn the other cheek" and "get over it."

But others thought that withholding the letter and the names of those who signed it was "cowardly," "inappropriate," and "unethical." They asked rhetorically if my critics should not "openly stand by their words and acts?" They supported my right to peacefully and non-violently discover the smears and slime thrown at me by "colleagues" who now piously claim their right to anonymity.

Via college email to all members of the faculty I raised the public offer to \$2,000, then \$2,500, then \$3,000, and so forth. At \$5,000 the current acting Provost and long-time friend, Pat McGuire, came to my home (11/22/11) to discuss the "situation" and to advise that my email offers were annoying some people and that Hobart and William Smith Colleges was considering restricting or terminating my email privileges. I raised the offer to \$10,000, not by campus-wide email, but in specific offers to several alumni.

Resolution?

Not yet. But I am optimistic. I have been a part of the Hobart and William Smith Colleges community for almost 40 years. I am proud of my record of teaching and activism on behalf of Palestinian human rights.

And I am proud of having fought against academic hypocrisy and cowardice, especially when it comes to Israel.

I am also proud that Hobart and William Smith Colleges did not completely roll over in the face of the *ritual defamation* initiated (or facilitated) by otherwise well-meaning “colleagues,” especially by those who are too cowardly to reveal or defend their participation in this injustice. And I am eternally thankful that the institution has allowed me to keep my emeritus status and my walking pass at the gym.

Appendix 1

Finger Lakes Times, September 27, 2009, Section D, p.1+ (not available on line)

What Does Holocaust Denial Really Mean?

In April 2007 the European Union agreed to set jail sentences up to three years for those who deny or trivialize the Holocaust. [\[2\]](#) More recently, in response to the remarks of Bishop Richard Williamson, the Pope has proclaimed that Holocaust denial is “intolerable and altogether unacceptable.”

But what does Holocaust denial really mean? Begin with the word Holocaust. The Holocaust [\[3\]](#) (spelled with a capital H) refers to the killing of six million Jews by the Nazis during World War II. It is supposed to be the German's "Final Solution" to the Jewish problem. Much of the systematic extermination was to have taken place in concentration camps by shooting, gassing, and burning alive innocent Jewish victims of the Third Reich.

People like Germar Rudolf, Ernst Zündel, and Bishop Williamson who do not believe this account and who dare to say so in public are reviled as bigots, anti-Semites, racists, and worse. Their alternate historical scenarios are not termed simply *revisionist*, but are demeaned as *Holocaust denial*. Rudolf and Zündel were shipped to Germany where they were tried, convicted, and sentenced to three and five years, respectively.

Politicians deride Holocaust revisionist papers and conferences as "beyond the pale of international discourse and acceptable behavior." [\[4\]](#) Non-Zionist Jews who participate in such revisionism, like Rabbi Dovid Weiss of the Neturei Karta, are denounced as "self-haters" and are shunned and spat upon. Even Professor Norman Finkelstein, whose parents were both Holocaust survivors and who wrote the book, *The Holocaust Industry*, has been branded a Holocaust denier.

But putting aside the virile hate directed against those who question the veracity of the typical Holocaust narrative, what is it that these people believe and say at the risk of imprisonment and bodily harm? For most Holocaust revisionists or deniers if you prefer, their arguments boil down to three simple contentions:

1. Hitler's "Final Solution" was intended to be ethnic cleansing, not extermination.
2. There were no homicidal gas chambers used by the Third Reich.
3. There were fewer than 6 million Jews killed of the 55 million who died in WWII.

Are these revisionist contentions so odious as to cause those who believe them to be reviled, beaten, and imprisoned? More importantly, is it possible that revisionist contentions are true, or even partially

true, and that they are despised because they contradict the story of the Holocaust, a story which has been elevated to the level of a religion in hundreds of films, memorials, museums, and docu-dramas?

Is it sacrilegious to ask, "If Hitler was intent on extermination, how did Elie Wiesel, his father, and two of his sisters survive the worst period of incarceration at Auschwitz?" Wiesel claims that people were thrown alive into burning pits, yet even the Israeli-trained guides at Auschwitz refute this claim.

Is it really "beyond international discourse" to question the efficacy and the forensic evidence of homicidal gas chambers? If other myths, like making soap from human fat, have been dismissed as Allied war propaganda, why is it "unacceptable behavior" to ask if the gas chamber at Dachau was not reconstructed by the Americans because no other homicidal gas chamber could be found and used as evidence at the Nuremberg trials?

For more than fifty years Jewish scholars have spent hundreds of millions of dollars to document each Jewish victim of the Nazi Holocaust. The Nazis were German, obsessed with paperwork and recordkeeping. Yet only 3 million names have been collected and many of them died of natural causes. So why is it heresy to doubt that fewer than 6 million Jews were murdered in the Second World War?

"Holocaust Denial" might be no more eccentric or no more criminal than claiming the earth is flat, except that the Holocaust itself has been used as the sword and shield in the quest to build a Jewish state between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, where even today over half the population is not Jewish.

The Holocaust narrative allows Yad Vashem, the finest Holocaust museum in the world, to repeat the mantra of "Never Forget" while it sits on Arab lands stolen from Ein Karem and overlooking the unmarked graves of Palestinians massacred by Jewish terrorists at Deir Yassin. It allows Elie Wiesel to boast of having worked for these same terrorists (as a journalist, not a fighter) while refusing to acknowledge, let alone apologize for, the war crimes his employer committed. It makes Jews the ultimate victim no matter how they dispossess or dehumanize or ethnically cleanse indigenous Palestinian people.

The Holocaust story eliminates any comparison of Ketzioth or Gaza to the concentration camps they indeed are. It memorializes the resistance of Jews in the ghettos of Europe while steadfastly denying any comparison with the resistance of Palestinians in Hebron and throughout the West Bank. It allows claims that this year's Hanukkah Massacre in Gaza, with a kill ratio of 100 to one, was a "proportionate response" to Palestinian resistance to unending occupation.

The Holocaust is used to silence critics of Israel in what the Jewish scholar, Marc Ellis, has called the ecumenical deal: you Christians look the other way while we bludgeon the Palestinians and build our Jewish state and we won't remind you that Hitler was a good Catholic, a confirmed "soldier of Christ," long before he was a bad Nazi.

The Holocaust narrative of systematic, industrialized extermination was an important neo-conservative tool to drive the United States into Iraq. The same neo-con ideologues, like Norman Podhoretz, routinely compare Ahmadinejad to Hitler and Nazism with Islamofascism with the intent of driving us into Iran. The title of the Israeli conference at Yad Vashem made this crystal clear: "Holocaust Denial: Paving the Way to Genocide."

"Remember the Holocaust" will be the battle cry of the next great clash of good (Judeo/Christian values) and evil (radical Islamic aggression) and those who question it must be demonized if not burned at the stake.

Daniel McGowan
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September 24, 2009

Because of admonishment by the administration, it is hereby stated that the above remarks are solely those of the author. Hobart and William Smith Colleges neither condone nor condemn these opinions. Furthermore, the author has been instructed to use his personal email address of mcgowandaniel@yahoo.com and not his college email at mcgowan@hws.edu for those wishing to contact him with comments or criticisms.

Appendix 2

This is a draft of the letter "facilitated" by James MaKinster, signed by six other "colleagues," and circulated to over 300 others in the Hobart and William Smith Colleges' community.

October 3, 2009

President Gearan,

This letter is a response to Daniel McGowan's defense of Holocaust deniers published in the *Finger Lakes Times* on September 27. The content of the essay and its publication on the eve of Yom Kippur was appalling. We are writing to you because of the disgrace to Hobart and William Smith caused by McGowan's continued use of the institutional imprimatur and his honorary title of "Emeritus Professor" to lend credence in disseminating his personal beliefs. He has every right as a private citizen to hold and spew forth whatever beliefs he may happen to have, but we ask you to prevent the use of his title and the name of Hobart and William Smith from contributing to its effects in the future.

It should be clear that while McGowan is claiming to raise legitimate historical and free speech issues, Holocaust denial has a history of being no more than thinly veiled anti-Semitism. When historians talk about the Holocaust what they mean is that approximately six million Jews and several millions of others were killed in an intentional and systematic fashion by the Nazis using a number of different means, including death by shooting and in gas chambers. This is the position held universally by scholars. The Holocaust deniers reject the historicity of the Holocaust based on three types of assertions. They reject the number of 6 million, the existence of killing camps, and the element of intentionality.

Professor McGowan's article is an example of denying the reality of the most studied and documented event in history. Holocaust denial carries absolutely no weight among academic scholars in any field whatsoever. Additionally, denying the undisputed facts of the Holocaust is not a way to show support for the Palestinians. For example, his argument denying the intentionality of the Nazi's execution of Jews is that there is not sufficient proof that it was designed to exterminate the Jewish population. Rather, he asserts, it may have been merely a program of "ethnic cleansing." The suggestion that this somehow

makes it less morally reprehensible speaks for itself, as we all know that the term “ethnic cleansing” was introduced to make genocide sound more palatable.

Professor McGowan’s position is a classic case of blaming the victims for their own victimization. Promo Levi wrote in *The Drowned and the Saved* that what he most feared was echoed in a remark by one of his SS guards: That if he somehow managed to live through this hell no one would believe his descriptions of Auschwitz. Sadly, for some, that day has arrived.

Freedom of speech is a right for citizens in a democracy that should be vigorously protected, especially when we find the content of that speech to be abhorrent. Colleges and universities have an educational obligation to encourage scholarship that reflects perspectives outside the mainstream of public political discourse, and we encourage that. Hate speech, on the other hand, is a trickier issue for campuses to wrestle with because while free speech has a special value, we have a duty to protect members of our diverse community from unsupported vitriol being espoused under the name of our colleges and its professors. We faculty of all persuasions, Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and atheists, are deeply offended and also share a special concern about the impact of such hateful messages (and its association with us) upon our Jewish students, staff, and faculty.

Professor McGowan’s actions do not meet our expectation of minimally rational and minimally humane discourse. As human beings who see the transparent motivation and effects of such writing, we are deeply disturbed and saddened to see a Hobart and William Smith title attached to it. We therefore request the removal of Professor McGowan’s honorary title of “Emeritus Professor.”

Sincerely,

Scott Brophy, Professor of Philosophy
Michael Dobkowski, Professor of Religious Studies
Khuram Hussain, Assistant Professor of Education
Steven Lee, Professor of Philosophy
James MaKinster, Associate Professor of Education
Lilian Sherman, Assistant Professor of Education
Charles Temple, Professor of Education

Notes:

[1] <http://www.lairdwilcox.com/news/defame.html>

[2] <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/850644.html>

[3] Holocaust. Dictionary.com. *The American Heritage® New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, Third Edition*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005.

Online: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/Holocaust> (accessed: February 09, 2007).

[4] <http://clinton.senate.gov/news/statements/details.cfm?id=268474> (accessed: February 09, 2007)

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